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## THE DANCE OF DEATH: FITZGERALD AND DECADENCE

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Alex Murray

In 1925, just months after F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* appeared in bookstores, the *New Yorker* published a series of "suggested bookplates" for American and British authors (Roth 18). The plate illustrator Herb Roth designed for Fitzgerald (fig. 1) features a dancing skeleton in a tuxedo with the motto "Be Your Age" emblazoned above. Anne Margaret Daniel reports that Fitzgerald was tickled with the image, and in the scrapbook of reviews and press coverage of *Gatsby* held in the Fitzgerald Papers at Princeton University, Roth's illustration is affixed to the inside front cover, "turning it into the very bookplate suggested" (15). As Daniel notes, the image was an apposite symbol for "the dangers he had foretold in *Gatsby* of decadence and of the coming Crash." Yet the image is more than just a serendipitous echo; the dance of death, danse macabre, or *Totentanz* (dance of death in German) is a recurring symbol and motif across Fitzgerald's oeuvre. It is an image Fitzgerald both inherited from European culture and reinvented for the Jazz Age. In tracing its deathly steps across Fitzgerald's body of work, this essay argues that the potent image of the dance of death reveals the extent to which Fitzgerald saw his own fictional practice as a dialogue, both implicit and explicit, with the literature and historiography of decadence and decline that so dominated European letters in the second half of the nineteenth century. While many have noted Fitzgerald's passing dalliance with decadence, the longevity and importance of that interest have yet to be addressed. This essay begins with Fitzgerald's introduction to decadence at Princeton, contextualizing it in relation



Figure 1. Herb Roth. "Suggested Bookplates: F. Scott Fitzgerald." *New Yorker* 26 Sept. 1925: 18.

to the revived popularity of Oscar Wilde and the 1890s in America at the dawn of the jazz age. While direct references to decadence may have ended after the publication of *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), I argue that decadence persists in his work, if obliquely, in the symbolic dance of death, his representation of cultural decline, and the recurring motif of a dying fall. Deepening our understanding of Fitzgerald's sustained dialogue with decadence allows us to see him as part of the dynamic reinvention of decadence that was undertaken by American writers in the early twentieth century.

William Blazek has argued persuasively that the most important of Fitzgerald's influences were European, most significantly John Keats and Joseph Conrad. Other influences came and went, and Fitzgerald

abandoned most of them "as he gained in confidence in his abilities" (Blazek 47). The author famously declared in an interview in 1920 that he was "a professed literary thief, hot after the best methods of every writer in my generation": "I want to be able to do anything with words: handle slashing, flaming descriptions like Wells, and use the paradox with the clarity of Samuel Butler, the breadth of Bernard Shaw and the wit of Oscar Wilde, I want to do the wide sultry heavens of Conrad, the rolled-gold sundowns and crazy quilt skies of Hichens and Kipling as well as the pastelle dawns and twilights of Chesterton" ("Interview" 34).

Fitzgerald's literary kleptomania was opportunistic; he pilfered the best techniques without any long-term aesthetic allegiances. For Blazek, aestheticism and decadence fit squarely into this category of transient influence, and it is unquestionable that Fitzgerald's enthusiasm for the seemingly frivolous literature of the fin de siècle waned over time. Yet the recurring motif of the deathly dance suggests that Fitzgerald saw in the model of European decadence a presentiment of the decline of the American culture that had for so long considered itself the antithesis of old Europe. In particular, this essay argues, Fitzgerald's development of the dance of death models his increasing use of symbolism and reprise as literary techniques, methods he developed both directly and indirectly from his interest in the literature of decadence.

### **Princeton and the Birth of Jazz Age America**

Recent years have seen an increasing scholarly awareness of the relatively neglected role that the literature of French and British decadence played in the development of American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the decadent strain in American letters at the opening of the twentieth century was observed as early as 1942 in Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds*, it was only recently, with the publication of David Weir's *Decadent Culture in the United States*, that the extent to which cliques of writers and artists, inspired by the literature of Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Joris-Karl Huysmans, attempted to forge an American variant of aestheticism and decadence has become clear. Weir's focus is on largely forgotten decadent writers and artists, including those who blazed the aesthetic trail in the 1890s (Ambrose Bierce, Edgar Saltus, Gelett Burgess, and Ralph Adams Cram), along with those who were involved in a decadent revival in the years around the First World War (for example, Ben Hecht, Carl Van Vechten, H. L. Mencken, and James Gibbons Huneker). His study doesn't extend to those who most famously chronicled America's decadent decade. As Weir suggests,

some of his readers are liable to think of decadence in relation to "truly canonical" figures, including Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, but their absence from the emerging narrative of American decadence is striking (xix). Fitzgerald came of age as a writer in a period in which an identifiably decadent literature was much more prevalent in America than in England. While on the other side of the Atlantic a small number of young English writers were beginning to rediscover decadence as an alternative to an emerging modernist orthodoxy, in cities such as New York and Chicago, decadence was much more popular in the 1920s than it ever had been in the 1890s. Yet the contexts, as Weir notes, were very different, and America seemed much less likely a place for decadent values and aesthetic theories to take root: "In America, the cultural conditions that produced the possibility of decadence in Europe simply did not exist" (1). The seemingly inhospitable conditions of course spurred many young writers on, and Fitzgerald himself noted the process of translation or adaptation that took place in the early 1920s. While Fitzgerald identifies a number of contexts, influences, and energies that made up the Jazz Age, the influence of English culture on that historical moment was telling: "the precocious intimacies of the younger generation . . . were implicit in the attempt to adapt English customs to American conditions" ("Echoes" 15). The process of adaptation featured a perhaps surprising fashion for the British literature of the 1890s. As Kazin claimed of the late teens, "there now came in a vogue of elaborate decadence and estheticism, very wicked, world-weary and ornate" (227); "the prophets of languor arose from the fin de siècle. Oscar Wilde lived again" (229). The return of Wilde was symbolized by the Modern Library selecting *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) as its first title when it was launched in 1917. In fact the first tranche of Modern Library suggested that the publishers saw the broader applicability of European literature of the 1880s and 1890s for contemporary America, with August Strindberg's *Married* (1884); Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), *The Enemy of the People* (1882), and *Ghosts* (1881); Guy de Maupassant's *Mademoiselle Fifi* (1883); and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) all joining *Dorian Gray* as representatives of modernity in literature.

The decadent poet and member of the Rhymers' Club, Richard Le Gallienne, having left England in 1900 to take up residence in America, regularly attempted to celebrate the literature of the 1890s in print, but in the wake of the Great War he noted a transformation in the legacy of the British 1890s in America, particularly in Wilde's reputation: "It is the greatest of all Oscar Wilde's surprises, his supreme paradox, that he whose earliest notoriety was that of a sort of effeminate artistic buffoon, masquerading with sunflowers and knee-

breeches, should be more and more recognized for one of the keenest intellects of our time, and one of its great spiritual influences" (261). While many writers and artists explored the contemporary echoes of the 1880s and 1890s in the 1920s with great seriousness, there was also space for ironic homage; from December 1924 to March 1925 the Provincetown Players, who had done so much to develop alternative American theater, put on a short run of Gilbert and Sullivan's parody of aestheticism and artistic pretension, *Patience* (1881). As one newspaper declared, "the finest burlesque upon artistic pose and sham in the English language is being presented in the center of that district whose name is associated with every kind of aesthetic attitude and humbug" ("Tulip" 250).

If irony was to signal that British decadence and aestheticism was (again) becoming out of fashion by 1925, the attitude of the young men of Princeton some ten years earlier was much more reverent. One of the most significant formative influences on Fitzgerald's approach to literary practice was Christian Gauss, Professor of Modern Literatures at Princeton when Fitzgerald was a student there. The young Fitzgerald was a poor language scholar, yet he became deeply influenced by Gauss's critical perspicacity and demand for precision and clarity in both reading and composition. Before he arrived as a preceptor at Princeton, Gauss had traveled extensively in Europe, working as a newspaper correspondent in Paris. It was here that he met Wilde in those last, most pathetic months of the great decadent's life, and Gauss's pupils at Princeton reveled in his stories of meeting the Irishman. Gauss's published work included essays on Paul Verlaine and on Arthur Symonds's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899).<sup>1</sup> It was also rumored that Gauss had "experimented one by one with all the drugs mentioned in Baudelaire's *Les Paradis artificiels*" (Wilson, "Christian" 11). While this was almost certainly an undergraduate fantasy, Edmund Wilson suggests that Gauss's aestheticism was deeply influential, insofar as he taught these young men "the fidelity to a kind of truth that is rendered by the discipline of aesthetic form, as distinct from that of the professional moralist." Wilson also claimed that his classmate Fitzgerald's development from the "loose and subjective concept of the novel" in *This Side of Paradise* to an "organized, impersonal one" in *The Great Gatsby* was "due to Christian's influence" (15). Gauss, he concludes, "made us all want to write something in which every word, every cadence, every detail, should perform a definite function in producing an intense effect" (15).

In *This Side of Paradise* the influence of decadence and aestheticism are writ large. Fitzgerald described the novel as "a romance and a reading list," and the novel offers its readers ample decadent direction ("Note-Books" 176). The novel has numerous references

to the fin de siècle: Sarah Bernhardt, Verlaine, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Wilde, Huysmans, Walter Pater, Théophile Gautier, and Paul Bourget all appear, and Fitzgerald famously signaled his affiliations from the outset. The novel's two epigraphs—from Wilde and Rupert Brooke—announce both the importance of decadence and its afterlives for Fitzgerald's novel, as well as the epideictic mode that characterizes it.<sup>2</sup> As Pearl James has suggested, the epigraphs also mark an anxiety of masculinity that suffuses Fitzgerald's debut novel: "Brooke's heroism and Wilde's ignominy offer contradictory models that the novel's effeminate protagonist must master" (2). The Wilde epigraph is from the third act of *Lady Windermere's Fan* and is a telling misquotation; in the play Lord Cecil declares, "Experience is the name Tuppy gives to his mistakes" (45). Dumbly corrects him: "Experience is the name every one gives to their mistakes." Fitzgerald takes this universal diagnosis and qualifies it: "Experience is the name so many people give to their mistakes" (1).<sup>3</sup> The suggestion then is that there are exceptions, and we as readers are then invited to consider Amory Blaine an exception—he either doesn't learn or these are not mistakes. The Wilde misquotation then serves to undermine from the outset the novel's generic identity as a bildungsroman. The novel begins with Amory's inheritance—he takes all of his traits from his mother with the exception of those "stray inexpressible few that made him worthwhile" (5)—and ends with a commingling of heritage and experience. Amory's return to Princeton sees him reflect on the generation of young men studying there now for whom all gods were dead and all wars fought: "And he could not tell why the struggle was worth while, why he had determined to use to the utmost himself and his heritage from the personalities he had passed" (251). In this movement away from heredity and toward self-determination and freedom, Fitzgerald implicitly acknowledges a debt to George Moore, whose decadent *künstlerroman*-cum-memoir *Confessions of a Young Man* repeatedly emphasizes the ability to shape-shift: "What is mine I have acquired, or, to speak more exactly, chance bestowed and still bestows upon me. I came into the world apparently with a nature like a smooth sheet of wax, bearing no impress, but capable of receiving any; of being moulded into all shapes" (1). Fitzgerald was familiar with Moore's work, and it is certain his decadent predecessor influenced his first novel in some part (Fitzgerald, "To the Editor" 496).

Decadent literature then provides a clear model for Amory's literary and personal development, as well as being one of his most important acquisitions. Amory's development truly begins to take shape once, at Princeton, he meets Thomas Parke D'Invilliers, modeled on John Peale Bishop (and who became a penname for Fitzgerald in the poem "Then Wear the Gold Hat," which is the epigraph for *The*



*Great Gatsby*). D'Invilliers introduces Amory to the work of Wilde, lending him *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and suddenly the quotidian life of the undergraduate is transformed: "The world became pale and interesting, and he tried hard to look at Princeton through the satiated eyes of Oscar Wilde and Swinburne" (48). Wilde launches the newly awakened Amory into a "heterogeneous" glut of reading, including key decadent writers W. B. Yeats, Ernest Dowson, and Symons. It is under the influence of these writers that Amory composes one of his most purple passages, headed "A Damp Symbolic Interlude," that echoes the languid prose of the decadents, turning Princeton into Oxford, the quads becoming "warehouses of dead ages" (50). There are echoes here of Pater's "Emerald Uthwart" (1892), Lionel Johnson's "Oxford" (1890), and Compton McKenzie's *Sinister Street* (1914), with Princeton becoming decidedly European, Catholic, and queer, as Tracy Fessenden notes (198). This is not the last of the ornate descriptions of Princeton, nor the most affected; that accolade belongs to a passage that is simply a prosified version of Fitzgerald's own homage to the university, "Princeton—The Last Day," first published in the *Nassau Literary Magazine* in 1917:

The last light wanes and drifts across the land,  
The low, long land, the sunny land of spires.  
The ghosts of evening tune again their lyres  
And wander singing, in a plaintive band  
Down the long corridors of trees. Pale fires  
Echo the night from tower top to tower.  
Oh sleep that dreams and dream that never tires,  
Press from the petals of the lotus-flower  
Something of this to keep, the essence of an hour!

No more to wait the twilight of the moon  
In this sequestered vale of star and spire;  
For one, eternal morning of desire  
Passes to time and earthy afternoon.  
Here, Heraclitus, did you build of fire  
And changing stuffs your prophecy far hurled  
Down the dead years; this midnight I aspire  
To see, mirrored among the embers, curled  
In flame, the splendor and the sadness of the world. (196)

The poem is clearly a paean to the university and to lost youth but is also a seemingly self-conscious reworking of the English pastoral tradition, as well as a tapestry of several decadent and aestheticist motifs. The poem appears indebted to a tradition of Oxford writing that turned the countryside around the university town into a Virgilian

pastoral landscape, a tradition that reached its zenith with Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar-Gipsy" (1853) and "Thyrsis" (1866). In method the poem is more like Wilde's "The Burden of Itys" (1881), in which the echoes of poetry past are so excessive as to be somewhere between pastiche, homage, and plagiarism. Fitzgerald's borrowings are extensive: the "sunny land of spires" resonates with Arnold's "sweet City with her dreaming spires" (539); "sequestered vale of star and spire" recalls the "sequester'd vale of life" from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (422). The invocation of Heraclitus and the vocabulary of fire, flames, lyres, and celestial imagery are heavily indebted to Swinburne, notably poems such as "The Triumph of Time," "Hymn to Proserpine," and "Dolores," while the "pale fires" conjure up Yeats's "A Poet to His Beloved" (1899).

It is unsurprising that Fitzgerald's tribute to Princeton on his departure was drenched in the language of a European poetic tradition. Yet in the years that followed, Fitzgerald began to transform the language and sentiment with which his education had equipped him into a new idiom. If Wilson had seen, many years later, Gauss as a definitive influence on himself and Fitzgerald, the Princeton professor sensed in the mid-1920s an irreconcilable generational gap opening between himself and his young charges. In an extraordinary open letter—never published—to the "Younger Generation" and dedicated to William Stanley Dell, Fitzgerald, and Wilson, Gauss sets out what he considered the fundamental differences between his generation and theirs. Gauss refused to moralize, his concern being alone with their "intellectual attitude, and what it means for the future of your country and mine, for the future of civilization in general" (72). Gauss's critique of Wilson, Fitzgerald, and their literary coterie was that they had lost all sense of value and in doing so had created a literature of ennui and boredom in which nothing except the emptiness of existence could spur them to create. They were, like their hero on the other side of the Atlantic, Aldous Huxley, giving us "not life" but "the phosphorescence of decay." Gauss's language—redolent of decadence and decline—may suggest the young writers still owed something of a debt to the 1890s, yet Gauss saw otherwise. While they had "taken seriously Oscar Wilde's jest that the easiest way to overcome sensation was to yield to it" (86), they were, in literary terms, far removed from the great poets of the 1890s; the "fragile, faintly iridescent verses of Ernest Dowson" were "perhaps the most exquisite poetry of the last century's closing years," and the nineties verse has "a wistfulness, a sense of the secret, the mystery of life that your age has lost" (90). Yet the exhausted air of the 1890s returns in Gauss's conclusion. Having quoted Dowson's "Vitae Summa Brevis Spem Nos Vetat Incohare Longam," with its world-weary sense of

the brevity of life and the imminence of death, Gauss closes, "Your generation is equally enthusiastic over past and prospective funerals, even its own. So let me not mourn and introduce any jarring note, at least not yet. For a little while let us remain in the plain of gaiety" (94). The funerary enthusiasms of Wilson and Fitzgerald were, as Gauss was well aware, a legacy of the 1890s, a legacy both had already acknowledged in their own prose. Yet the funerary obsessions Wilson and Fitzgerald were developing are evidence of a modified relationship with the literature of decadence and aestheticism. No longer were they content merely to namedrop authors and borrow techniques: they had now begun to use the structure of decadent critique to fashion their own challenge to postwar American culture.

### **The Dance of Death: Necrotic *Gatsby***

In 1922 Alfred A. Knopf published *The Undertaker's Garland*, a striking collection of poetry and prose. Knopf, since its founding in 1915, had published a number of American writers who were attempting to translate European decadence into an indigenous form, including Van Vechten and Joseph Hergesheimer, and this new collection, written by Wilson and Bishop, was definitely cut from the same cloth. As the name suggests, *The Undertaker's Garland* is a morbid collection of texts that explore death and destruction, obviously inspired by the necrotic obsessions of French decadents such as Baudelaire and Huysmans, complete with striking Beardsleyesque black-and-white illustrations by Boris Artzybasheff. The preface, written by Wilson, declares the collection a response to the dissatisfaction that a generation of young men experienced on return from the battlefields of France. Bishop and Wilson were both deployed to Europe but saw little action. Yet the atmosphere of war had irrevocably changed them: "The air of the whole world seemed poisoned with decay; one could escape it nowhere; one choked in the very autumn clearness and the winds of spring, which were tainted now with the foulness of those seven million dead" (16). Returning to America in 1918 at the end of the war, this new generation regarded their native country with a newly cynical gaze. Repulsed by its conservatism, naive optimism, and commercialism, these young men sought to live life with the hedonistic quickening they had encountered in France. They found their native country far from receptive: "Our cries 'for madder music and for stronger wine' met with absolutely no response, and we were informed that any attempt to get the latter would be considered a criminal offence. For money, it appeared, was the thing to get, not music nor wine" (19). America seemed at odds with the progressive, transgressive literature of Europe, its puritanical, mercantile culture



Figure 2. Boris Artzybasheff, "Untitled." John Peale Bishop and Edmund Wilson, *The Undertaker's Garland*. New York: Knopf, 1922.

a far cry from the decadence of Dowson. Yet decadence was never a celebration of decline as much as an antagonistic challenge to it, and Wilson and Bishop's collection saw itself as a trenchant critique of the automatism of capitalist America. In order to draw attention to the undead monotony of life in American cities they presented that world in all its morbid emptiness:

The city streets where we walked were as deep and as dark as graves; the great buildings seemed to us like tombs where the dead lay tier on tier. Wherever the characteristic activity of our time had passed, the earth appeared charred and sterile, littered with rubbish and bones. We

found our hymns to beauty and to love all turning into funeral dirges and, instead of our old witty trifles, we fell to writing epitaphs. In a word, our environment and age have at last proved too strong for us, and, in a spirit which we honestly hope is one of loyal Americanism, we have decided that we shall best interpret our country in a book devoted to death. (22)

In turning postwar urban America into a giant necropolis, the two young men were signaling their affiliation with a particularly European sophistication; nihilism and ennui seemed the only legitimate response to a corrupted cultural landscape. Yet importantly they suggested their revenant postwar America was trapped in the grips of a *danse macabre*, comparing their own project with the famous woodcuts by Hans Holbein in which Death cruelly returned to torment the living. As Wilson concluded, "at the darkest point of the Middle Ages people made a farce of death. To the people of the XVth century death itself had more life in it than life has today" (23). But there was a much more recent manifestation of the *danse macabre* that Peale and Bishop had drawn on; Charles Baudelaire had, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, transformed Paris of the Second Empire into a deathly discotheque:

Withered Antinoi, dandies with smooth faces,  
Varnished corpses, hoary-haired Lovelaces,  
The universal swing of the *danse macabre*  
Sweeps you along into places unknown! (93)

There are also echoes in both Baudelaire's poem and Wilson's preface of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," in which the "arabesque figures" are whirling in a ghostly revel (131). Perhaps most significantly, Bishop and Wilson were echoing Wilde's "The Harlot's House," in which the dance of death had been updated for modernity, a modern brothel the home of a cadaverous bacchanal as "strange mechanical grotesques, / Making fantastic arabesques" dance to the music of Strauss (134). These "wire-pulled automatons, / Slim silhouetted skeletons" "sidling through the slow quadrille" appall the speaker who, turning to his love, remarks, "The dead are dancing with the dead, / The dust is whirling with the dust" (135). But his love is entranced by the spectacle and leaves him to join the ghoulish gathering. Symons too linked the life of prostitutes with the dance of death in his poem "Emmy." Here the speaker addresses the eponymous streetwalker: "O my child, who wronged you first, and began / First the dance of death that you dance so well?" (*Silhouettes* 24–25). By echoing Dowson, Wilde, Symons, Baudelaire, Poe, and

Holbein, Wilson and Bishop aligned their own nascent literary project with earlier, largely European models, using the dance of death as a means of critiquing the vapid emptiness of the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald was delighted when he heard news that Wilson and Bishop's collection was forthcoming, suggesting to Wilson that they should ask a famous New York undertaker to provide a preface or cover endorsement ("To Edmund Wilson," 25 Nov. 348). Yet it was three years later that Fitzgerald himself provided the most telling endorsement of Wilson and Bishop's vision of American necrosis, drawing on their central image as he wrote what was to become his most famous novel.

From the beginning of his writing career Fitzgerald had been attracted to images of decline and decay. Writing to Wilson in May of 1921, Fitzgerald, with prescient foresight, declared that New York's emergence as a cultural capital presaged its decline: "Culture follows money and all the refinements of aestheticism can't stave off its change of seat. . . . We will be Romans in the next generations as the English are now" (346). Fitzgerald routinely drew on the cyclical historiography of decline so prevalent in the 1890s, whereby the decline of the British Empire was prefigured in the decline some 1500 years earlier of the Roman Empire. Fitzgerald updated this rhetoric for the 1920s, and it is in *The Great Gatsby* that we see the most explicit link between a decadent past and present. The novel had been called *Trimalchio* in draft form, and in the published version Nick Carraway describes Gatsby as Trimalchio, a king in Petronius's *The Satyricon*.

Contemporary America as Rome redux had been developed by Fitzgerald some years earlier in one of his first published stories, "Porcelain and Pink," which appeared in *The Smart Set* in 1920, before *This Side of Paradise* had made him a literary sensation. This one-act play opened in the risqué setting of a bathroom in which Julie Marvis, lying in a bathtub, sings,

When Caesar did the Chicago  
 He was a graceful child,  
 Those sacred chickens  
 Just raised the dickens  
 The Vestal Virgins went wild.  
 Whenever the Nervii got nervy  
 He gave them an awful razz  
 They shook in their shoes  
 With the Consular blues  
 The Imperial Roman Jazz. (116)

It was only five years later that Fitzgerald would have the jazz orchestras of Long Island playing the same decadent tune, its modern-day caesars stepping out in their own deathly dance. Fitzgerald was far

from alone in his attempt to link jazz with a language and historiography of decline. For some horrified observers, jazz was the beginning of the end for American civilization. Anne Shaw Faulkner's notoriously histrionic article "Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?" framed jazz dancing with an excess reminiscent of Max Nordau, the great critic of European decadence: "the effect of jazz on the normal brain produces an atrophied condition on the brain cells of conception, until very frequently those under the demoralizing influence of the persistent use of syncopation, combined with inharmonic [sic] partial tones, are actually incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, right and wrong" (16). Modern dance in America was repeatedly referred to as the dance of death, the symbol taking on literal form when, at a Fourth of July party at Boston's Pickwick Club in 1925, forty-four people died after the floor gave way, allegedly as a result of revelers' syncopated steps of the Charleston ("On with the Charleston" 40). For one anonymous observer writing in *Munsey's Magazine* in 1925, modern dance had gone far beyond its medieval predecessor: "even the danse macabre is cheerful compared with this spiritless jerking of marionettes," suggesting that Wilde's "The Harlot's House" offered a presentiment to the lifeless and lurid "epileptic dance" known as the Charleston ("Odd Measure" 513). Elizabeth Robbins Pennell, who had been a critical observer of London in the 1890s, would likewise declare "jazz, the music for a new rollicking dance of death" (539). In a similar vein, the war poet Siegfried Sassoon was far from impressed with the vacuous life of American entertainment in the 1920s, lamenting the "jostling crowds / That shuffle through Broadway," "Whose jazz of glory is a dance of death" (620).

The dance of death had then been invoked by numerous writers and authors in the first four years of the 1920s, and when Fitzgerald came to write *The Great Gatsby* he was more than aware of its powerful potential as a metaphor for capturing the lifeless excesses of New York in the Jazz Age. Moreover, he was also aware, as were many others, of the parallels between the dissipated lives of his generation and those who had lived on the edge in the so-called naughty nineties and Paris of the Second Empire. *The Great Gatsby*, with its lavish parties, superficial lifestyles, and jaded sensuality seemed to echo the heady days of fin-de-siècle Paris or London. For two of the most important reviewers of the novel, the relation to European excesses was obvious. In his review of the novel in the *Nation*, Van Vechten suggested that the excesses of the flappers of the twenties would put even the most dyspeptic decadent to shame: "More cocktails and champagne are consumed in the novels of Scott Fitzgerald than a toper like Paul Verlaine could drink in a lifetime. 'The Beautiful and Damned,' indeed, is an epic of inebriation beside which

"L'Assommoir" fades into Victorian insipidity" (576). Van Vechten felt that Fitzgerald's work and its world was no longer of a piece with the decadent literature that had so inspired his own attempts to capture the mood of the city.

If Van Vechten suggested Fitzgerald's New York had outdone its fin-de-siècle counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic, Fitzgerald was more than aware that his mode of critique was drawn from Europe. Fitzgerald intimated in a letter to Mencken that he felt himself to be writing a new chapter in New York literature; apropos the soon-to-be-published *Gatsby*, he "hoped it would amuse the Mencken who wrote the essay on New York in the last book of *Prejudices*—tho I know nothing in the new Paris streets that I like better than Park Avenue at twilight" ("To H. L. Mencken," 4 May 500). The essay to which Fitzgerald refers, "Totentanz," saw Mencken railing against the ugliness and vice of Manhattan. Mencken begins his essay with the image of Manhattan Island as it appeared to its earliest visitors for whom it must be "strangely beautiful. But it was the beauty of freshness and unsophistication—in brief, of youth—and now it is no more" (84). If Fitzgerald too invokes a prelapsarian New York as Mencken had, it serves only to render more vulgar, more depraved, the excesses of New York on that "slender riotous island which extends itself due east" (*Gatsby* 9). Mencken's essay suggests that New York can lay claim, far more than London or Paris, to being the modern Babylon: "since 1914 it has entered upon a period of luxuriousness that far surpasses anything seen on earth since the fall of the Eastern Empire" (85). Mencken goes on to rail against the power of the bootlegger under prohibition and tells of "a single party at which the guests drank 100 cases of champagne in an evening." To even the casual reader, it is clear that Mencken's essay provided the blueprint for some of the most memorable scenes, not to mention the moral structure, of Fitzgerald's novel. Most tellingly Mencken expresses astonishment that "no Zola had arisen to describe this engrossing and incomparable dance of death" (86). Fitzgerald, it would appear, was offering himself as the unflinching naturalist able to do justice to this world of mindless depravity. Mencken reviewed the novel a few months after publication and, although critical of the form, commended its unflinching attempt to depict a corrupt civilization. He describes *Gatsby* and the other characters as "performers in a Totentanz" ("As H. L. M." 9). But if Mencken wanted a Zola to come along he concluded his review by suggesting that *Gatsby* had gone much further: "[W]e are in an atmosphere grown increasingly levantine. The Paris of the Second Empire pales to a sort of snobbish chautauqua. . . . To find a parallel for the grossness and debauchery that now reign in New York one must go back to the Constantinople of Basil I." Mencken,



a year after *The Great Gatsby* was published, remained certain that no one had yet offered the definitive depiction of New York's depravity, writing in his editorial for the *Mercury*: "There are parts for all in the *Totentanz*, even for moralists to call the figures. But there is, as yet, no recorder to put it on paper" ("Editorial" 161). While posterity has proven Mencken wrong, it is clear that both he and Fitzgerald had seen the dance of death as the ideal symbol for the excesses of the Jazz Age and that the novelist-as-moralist was best placed to depict the dance. Fitzgerald recognized elsewhere that the essence of Mencken's "idea had always been ethical rather than aesthetic" ("How to Waste" 106), and it is in following this movement from a youthful mode of aestheticism to a scathing indictment of the Jazz Age that produces a profound shift in Fitzgerald's work.

Fitzgerald then saw *The Great Gatsby* as depicting a *Totentanz*, and the novel routinely seeks to blur the boundaries between the living and the dead. Funereal rites seep into the novel from the outset: Nick Carraway jokingly tells Daisy that Chicago was left so "desolate" by her absence that "all the cars have the left rear wheel painted black as a mourning wreath" (14). The most striking image of contemporary New York as a necropolis appears as Nick and Gatsby drive over the Queensboro Bridge. Nick reflects that the city seen from this vantage point "is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world" (73). Yet what seems to be an image of potentiality is immediately juxtaposed with a reminder of mortality:

A dead man passed us in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by two carriages with drawn blinds and by more cheerful carriages for friends. The friends looked out at us with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe, and I was glad that the sight of Gatsby's splendid car was included in their somber holiday. As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish Negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry. (73)

Putting aside the novel's problematic association of cultural decline with the ascent—the "haughty rivalry"—of the "Negroes," the hearse and the car full of wealthy revelers are of a piece in a culture of mindless hedonism. Rather than functioning as a grim memento mori, the dead jostle for a place with the living. If the boundaries between the living and the dead appear permeable, the effect is, ultimately, to devalue life. Gatsby's poorly attended funeral is a stark reminder of how little value the dancing dead of Gatsby's parties care for a

life extinguished, as the pathetic spectacle of a handful of servants, Nick, and Gatsby's father follow the "motor hearse, horribly black and wet" "through the gate into the cemetery" (182).

If death hangs over the novel like a funeral pall, dancing provides some of the most captivating scenes of life and movement. Yet dance also functions as a synecdoche for death and dissolution. When Nick recounts Daisy's life after Jay Gatz has left to fight in Europe we are told, "[A]ll night the saxophones wailed the hopeless comment of the 'Beale Street Blues' while a hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers shuffled the shining dust" (158). Daisy is drawn into this "artificial world" "redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes," hers among the "fresh faces drifted here and there like rose petals blown by the sad horns around the floor." The dance halls that give birth to the Jazz Age are already poisoned, and Daisy, drawn to the sepulchral swing of the music becomes touched by death: "Through this twilight universe Daisy began to move again with the season; suddenly she was again keeping half a dozen dates a day with half a dozen men and drowsing asleep at dawn with the beads and chiffon of an evening dress tangled among dying orchids on the floor beside her bed" (159). The deathly detritus of the dance is Fitzgerald's subtle means of drawing the decadent symbol of the dance of death into the Jazz Age. Like Wilde, Baudelaire, and Symons before him, Fitzgerald problematically ties female sexuality, modern culture, and death into a potent image of critique.

### **"Spooks Caught into a Fantastic Dance": Decadent Symbolism**

If Fitzgerald had become deeply critical of the Jazz Age in the period leading up to writing *Gatsby*, he was, by 1927 when he returned to New York, certain it had left Europe and the French capital behind: "the catering to dissipation set an example to Paris; the shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser and the liquor was cheaper; but all these benefits did not really minister to much delight" ("My Lost" 30). The city had become "bloated, gutted, stupid with cake and circuses," its luxuriousness and hubris brought to a thudding halt by the Wall Street crash of October 1929 (31). By the 1930s, with both Europe and America entering into a new dispensation, Fitzgerald's perspective on cultural decline had deepened but was now also colored by his own tendency toward nostalgia. Fitzgerald had been part of a clique who

had revived the days of 1895 in the mid-1910s and early 1920s. The Jazz Age had been decadence redux, so when the time came in the 1930s for Fitzgerald to mark the passing of that frenzy of youth he often conflated the two moments. In "Echoes of the Jazz Age" in 1931 he would declare that that period was now "as dead as were the Yellow Nineties in 1902" (13). It is an odd comment, given that it frames his and others' attempts to revive decadence in the early teens as out of time. In "My Lost City" he recalled that "when bored we took our city with a Huysmans-like perversity. . . . For us the city was inevitably linked up with Bacchic diversions, mild or fantastic" (28–29). Huysmans had become a synecdoche for a raft of perverse pleasures for a certain historical moment, now passed. "My Lost City" is a melancholic essay, a mournful recollection of lost youth and its happy illusions. Given the excesses and horrors of the late 1920s those heady days of youthful transgression had taken on a pleasant piquancy. In his final completed novel Fitzgerald captured a world of dissipation on the edge of disaster, yet in his portrayal of Dick Diver's fall into alcoholism and social isolation Fitzgerald refused to lend decline the air of tragedy. Decadence, in its literal meaning of a falling away from a once lofty position, is invoked here only to refuse the consolations of judgement and catharsis. Instead Fitzgerald draws on the symbolism of the dance of death as the vehicle of the dying fall he was so determined to produce.

*Tender Is the Night* is suffused with a melancholy air of decay and decline, Fitzgerald taking that atmosphere from the shores of the Mediterranean on which it is predominantly set. Fitzgerald drew on an established model for American and British visitors to Southern Europe. As John Pemble notes "on the threshold of the South" the traveler "experienced an apotheosis. He passed from the circumference to the centre of things, and his thoughts dwelt on roots, origins, essentials, and ultimate affinities" (8). Fitzgerald drew heavily on this language of origins, writing in 1924, "When your eyes first fall upon the Mediterranean you know at once why it was here that man first stood erect and stretched out his arms toward the sun" ("How to Live" 56). But Fitzgerald only invokes the image of a youthful humanity to further underscore the exhaustion and corruption that had come to color this landscape; it was where "the whole world has come" "to forget or to rejoice, to hide its face or have its fling, to build white palaces out of the spoils of oppression or to write books which sometimes batter those palaces down." It was of course also one of the destinations of the destitute decadent, "Oscar Wilde in the depths of his disgrace."

Where previously American writers such as Henry James and Edith Wharton had used the landscape of Southern Europe as the

location for the dramatic encounter between putative American innocence and European experience, Fitzgerald's Dick Diver is seemingly at one with his adopted home, his alcoholic decline marking him out as part of a European culture of decay. Allusions to the past glory of Rome and its subsequent decline and depravity recur in *Tender Is the Night*: Rosemary Hoyt is acting in a film titled "*The Grandeur that Was Rome*" (226); a drunken Dick, struggling to begin a conversation with two strangers in a bar, thinks he could tell them "all about Rome and the violent origins of the Colonna and Gaetani families but he realized that as a beginning that would be somewhat abrupt" (243–44). Everywhere the characters turn they are faced with images of decline: Dick and Rosemary have lunch in a restaurant "in a high-terraced villa overlooking the ruined forum of an undetermined period of the decadence" (233). Diver has become aware he has spent too long in Europe and is now a harbinger of death, a ghostly visitant seemingly at home in the ruinous environment of the Mediterranean; as he says to Rosemary, "I guess I'm the Black Death. . . . I don't seem to bring people happiness any more" (239). Dick's deathly decline then places him in a seemingly symbiotic relationship with the landscape of southern Europe. In Rome, Dick's fall into ignominy—he has just been jailed after a drunken fight with some taxi drivers—seems in harmony with his surroundings: "There was dirty water in the gutters and between the rough cobblestones; a marshy vapor from the Campagna, a sweat of exhausted cultures tainted the morning air" (244).

As Dick begins to inhabit a culture of decline he also begins to look back with a fond nostalgia. There are several moments in the novel when Diver imagines himself drifting into the past; in the tap-room of a hotel in Gstaad, Diver contemplates life in a simpler time:

With the pert heady wine he relaxed and pretended that the world was all put together again by the gray-haired men of the golden nineties who shouted old glees at the piano, by the young voices and the bright costumes toned into the room by the swirling smoke. For a moment he felt that they were in a ship with landfall just ahead; in the faces of all the girls was the same innocent expectation of the possibilities inherent in the situation and the night. (191–92)

The 1890s now appear as a time of possibility, of potentiality, the last moment when the "ship" of Western civilization was still moving toward "landfall." "Innocent expectation" is now anathema to a culture grown luxurious and cynical, and as much as Dick longs for a world "all put together again," he knows it to be a vain hope, conscionable only under the effects of alcohol and manufactured memory.

The atmosphere of cultural decline is paralleled in the novel by a stylistic diminuendo. As Fitzgerald made clear in a number of letters around the time of the novel's publication, including those to Ernest Hemingway, Bishop, and Mencken, the "motif of the 'dying fall'" that drove the novel was inspired by Conrad's 1897 preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* ("To H. L. Mencken," 23 Apr. 529). This "dying fall," Fitzgerald explained to Bishop, was preferable to "the dramatic ending" ("To John Peale Bishop" 383) and to John O'Hara he claimed that he wanted to end the novel on "a fade away instead of a staccato" ("To John O'Hara" 557). The extent to which the dying fall is taken from Conrad is ambiguous. The preface famously outlines something like a theory of literary impressionism and suggests that if prose was to achieve a level of artistry it must, in something of a Paterian manner, aspire to the condition of music: "the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music—which is the art of arts" (ix–x). While the form was musical, Conrad's effect was famously designed to make his reader "see" (x). At no point in the preface does Conrad use the phrase "dying fall." The precise inspiration for Fitzgerald's use of the term is then uncertain, but he may have taken it from Conrad's *Nostromo* in which the eponymous character happens on a dance hall in which the crowd is "chanting in unison the refrain of a love song, with a dying fall" (95). While the most famous use of the term is in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, a more telling and contemporaneous usage comes from T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "I know the voices dying with a dying fall / Beneath the music from a farther room" (14). Dying sounds and fading voices are an intrinsic part of *Tender Is the Night*, and Fitzgerald repeatedly uses the ellipsis to signify speeches half heard. At one point the near synonym of "dying fall" is used in precisely this context, as Hannan speaks to Dick in a "dying cadence" (216). These motifs of the empty voice proliferate: when Dick attempts to hypnotize Nicole in the initial period of her treatment, she tells him, "you're wrecked and ruined—you're a ghostly echo from a broken wall" (203).

As Vincent Sherry has recently noted, the literature of British and American modernism inherited from decadence the conjunction of a "temporal imaginary" (26), "the experience of historical time in a sort of posterior sense" (29) and of a particular poetic technique that he variously calls a "fade away" (68), a "poetics of the afterward" (63), and a "dying fall that goes on dying" (57). The dying fall in decadent poetics is one of the techniques that characterizes the decadent ideal

as articulated by Symons: "to fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul" ("Decadent" 862). Fitzgerald shares with decadent writers such as Swinburne, Symons, and Dowson and with their modernist inheritors such as Eliot and Ezra Pound what Sherry calls a "dying fall that keeps on dying," figured in *Tender Is the Night* as the uncanny echo of the past (57). Whereas Conrad wanted his readers to "see" the present with clarity, Fitzgerald wants his readers to hear the past. When Franz confronts Dick over his problematic drinking, Fitzgerald frames his response as a dying fall: "He was seized by an overwhelming disgust for the situation. To explain, to patch—these were not natural functions at their age—better to continue with the cracked echo of an old truth in the ears" (276). Fitzgerald provides a number of reverberations across the novel, some of which are for the world of prewar Europe and others are stylistic, their cracked echoes creating significant distortions within the narrative.

It is in arguably the most important chapter in the novel that Fitzgerald offers us a key example of the dying fall, twinned here with a resurrected dance of death as he develops his most complex and striking image of decadence. The party on Golding's yacht in chapter 5 of book 3 sees Dick's most humiliating drunken debauch. Dick and Nicole decide to attend the party after having a rather uncomfortable encounter with their cook Augustine whom they fired for drinking Dick's finest vintages. Before they board the boat the mood is muted: Nicole notes Dick's "enlarging silence," and when he speaks, his "voice came to her from far off" (288). As they arrive on a launch at Golding's yacht the oscillation between presence and absence, embodied and disembodied becomes striking; the music they hear wafting toward them is interpreted as an orchestra by Nicole but a radio by Dick. In his increasing solipsism and misanthropy Dick prefers to imagine a world without people. As they walk onto the boat Fitzgerald transposes Dick's desire for music without presence into a haunting hallucination of a dance: "As they passed through the principal salon they saw ahead of them figures that seemed to dance in the half light of the circular stern. This was an illusion made by the enchantment of the music, the unfamiliar lighting, and the surrounding presence of water. Actually, save for some busy stewards, the guests loafed on a wide divan that followed the curve of the deck" (289). This ghost dance functions as a narrative precursor to the appearance of the familiar figure of the dance of death later in the chapter. On Golding's boat the appearance of Lady Sibly-Biers captivates everyone. Tommy Barban tells Nicole that she is "now the wickedest woman in London" (291), but it is her appearance, both inhuman and sickly on which Fitzgerald focuses; she appears to Nicole

to have "lovely metallic hair, almost green in the deck lights" (290) but is also "fragile, tubercular—it was incredible that such narrow shoulders, such puny arms could bear aloft the pennon of decadence, last ensign of the fading empire. Her resemblance was rather to one of John Held's flat-chested flappers than to the hierarchy of tall languid blondes who had posed for painters and novelists since before the war" (291). This beautiful, fragile, debauched symbol of decay is both quintessentially English yet strangely American as Fitzgerald conflates her appearance with the flappers of John Held whose iconic cartoons were inextricably linked in the public imaginary with Fitzgerald's early work; indeed Held provided illustrations for the covers of *Tales of the Jazz Age* and *The Vegetable*. This transatlantic image of decadence becomes the target for the grumblings of the dyspeptic and drunken Dick Diver who is seated next to her at dinner. Nicole can only overhear snatches of Dick's rant, but those fragments that reach her ear are telling: ". . . It's all right for you English, you're doing a dance of death. . . . Sepoys in the ruined fort, I mean Sepoys at the gate and gaiety in the fort and all that. The green hat, the crushed hat, no future" (292; ellipses in original). Here Fitzgerald returns to the image of the *Totentanz*, or danse macabre, blending it with the demise of Empire (the Indian mutiny of 1857) and the culture of the Bright Young Things of the 1920s, figured here in an allusion to Michael Arlen's wildly successful study of Mayfair decadence *The Green Hat* (1924). Dick seemingly envies the young British woman her decadence; as an American, he appears unable, try as he might, to authentically inhabit this European model of decadence. Yet this incident is seemingly one more installment in Dick's own spiral of decline, and at the start of the next chapter Nicole reflects that she and Dick were "mutating, undefined, appeared as spooks caught up into a fantastic dance" (300–01). This apparition manifests Nicole's increasingly uneasy sense of foreboding about the end: "Nicole did not know whether she was to be crushed or spared—Dick's voice, throbbing with insincerity, confused the issue; she couldn't guess how he was going to behave next upon the tortuously slow unrolling of the carpet, nor what would happen at the end, at the moment of the leap" (301). Yet Fitzgerald was to offer no definitive end, no leap. Dick's end is prefigured on Golding's yacht as his suicide, yet Fitzgerald refuses to offer the tragic ending that would provide readers with an easy resolution. It is in this that Fitzgerald followed the logic of Conrad and of decadence's dying fall. Decadence gave Fitzgerald a model in which the symbol—the dance of death—was the true means of critiquing modernity and its cultural decline. Narrative endings, the "moment of the leap" are inimical to a literary practice that denied catharsis.

### **Conclusion: "Fragments of Stories Dancing in an Open Fire"**

Toward the end of his life Fitzgerald seemingly had little interest in the literature of decadence that had spurred his earlier creative development, writing to his daughter, Scottie, in 1940 that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was "little more than a somewhat highly charged fairy tale which stimulates adolescents to intellectual activity at about seventeen (it did the same for you as it did for me)" ("To Frances Scott Fitzgerald" 111–12). While Wilde was no longer a writer Fitzgerald respected, Fitzgerald's outright dismissal of decadence is somewhat disingenuous, for at the core of his fictional practice still lay the decadent symbol of the dance of death. Fitzgerald never completed *The Last Tycoon*, yet in the surviving manuscript and notes the novel demonstrates the centrality of the symbol as a mode of critique. The novel is a savage attack on the superficiality and emptiness of Hollywood, yet it also evinces an anxiety about the capacity of the novel as a form to survive in the age of cinema. Fitzgerald returns to his motif of the dance of death to capture this paradox and anxiety: "Under the moon the back lot was thirty acres of fairyland—not because the locations really looked like African jungles and French châteaux and schooners at anchor and Broadway at night, but because they looked like the torn picture books of childhood, like fragments of stories dancing in an open fire" (32). Here, as Milton R. Stern notes, Fitzgerald has turned the Hollywood back lot into a "phantasmagoria," the moon transforming a scene of manufactured fantasy into a scene of a vivid imaginative unreality (328). Yet it is at the same time a holocaust of childhood innocence and a destruction of the potential of literature to transform. Where once the "picture books of childhood" had held within them the power to animate, the back lots of Hollywood have colonized the land of narrative. Yet the analogy here is ambivalent: is it the "thirty acres of fairyland" that are caught in a pyrotechnic dance of death or the "fragments of stories" or perhaps both? Again the dance of death has been appropriated as a symbol for a culture in decline, a world of morbid marionettes "dancing in an open fire."

### **Notes**

1. See Gauss's "Gérard De Nerval" and "Paul Verlaine."
2. On the epideictic mode in decadent writing, see Potolsky. On Brooke's relationship to decadence, see Lockerd.



3. Fitzgerald purposefully misquotes. In a letter to Wilson in which he outlines *The Romantic Egoist* (the title of the earlier work that became *This Side of Paradise*) the quotation is correct. See Fitzgerald, "To Edmund Wilson," 10 Jan. 1918.

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